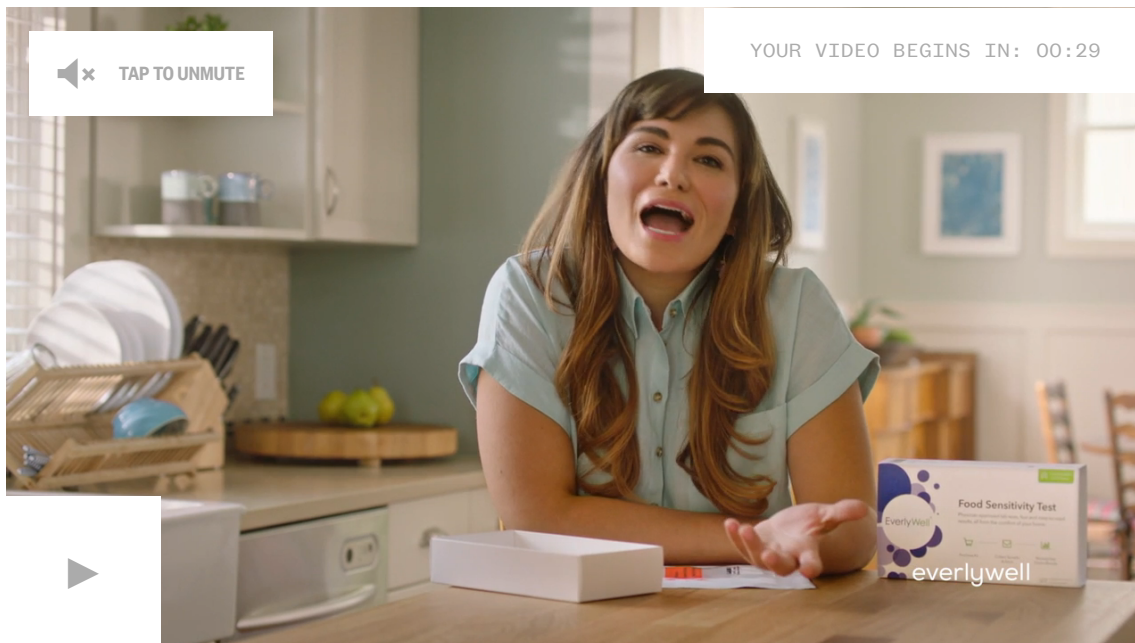


POLITICS & POLICY

Bradley Bowman Afghanistan war critics blame Biden for the current chaos. They need to look in the mirror.

The tragedy's primary cause was the decision to withdraw, not the way the withdrawal was conducted.



Aug. 25, 2021, 7:54 PM EDT

By Bradley Bowman, senior director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies' Center on Military and Political Power

For years, politicians and pundits on both the left and right have been invoking the misleading mantra of “**endless war**” to condemn the continuing presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and to demand that U.S. troops return home regardless of continued threats facing Americans. Advocates for a withdrawal that ignored conditions on the ground finally got their way in Afghanistan this summer, and the **preventable catastrophe** we are now witnessing is the result — revealed in heartbreaking images of Afghan men, women and children fleeing for their lives as the Taliban recapture the country.

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advocates for a withdrawal that ignored conditions on the ground finally got their way in Afghanistan this summer, and the preventable catastrophe we are now witnessing is the result.

In response, many of the very same advocates for withdrawal are now **expressing shock and sadness** regarding **consequences** of the **policy they supported** that were **entirely predictable**. These advocates are attempting to argue the catastrophe has been caused by the way President Joe Biden's withdrawal has been implemented rather than the decision to withdraw itself.

That argument, however, does not withstand scrutiny. Anyone paying the slightest attention knew in advance that a premature U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, based on keeping to a certain deadline, would likely result in a Taliban takeover. As **The New York Times reported** Aug. 18, the "intelligence agencies warned for years about the Taliban's strength and the likelihood that the Afghan government and military could not hold on after U.S. and international military forces left."

Shortly after Biden assumed office, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley advised the president to keep troops in Afghanistan and warned of the consequences of not doing so, **The New York Times reported**. In March, Austin

and Milley essentially conducted a last-ditch intervention with the president, reminding him of the failed 2011 U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq (**which Biden supported**), the subsequent rise of the Islamic State group in the vacuum left by U.S. troops and the costly return of the American military in 2014. "We've seen this movie before," Austin reportedly cautioned Biden.

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These warnings were publicly and explicitly reinforced by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on April 9 in its **annual threat assessment** presented to Congress. "The Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support," the intelligence community warned.

But Biden brushed aside these warnings, and on April 14 announced his decision to **withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan** by the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on our country. The response from the left was nearly universal praise. That includes New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd. On April 17, **she declared** that "Biden was right to ignore dire warnings about what will happen when we leave."

Dire indeed

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Many Democratic politicians are also pointing to Biden rather than looking inward. As **CNN** **noted** last week, though many **Democrats are now calling for investigations** into what went wrong in the pullout, “members of his party in Congress nearly all backed Biden when he announced plans to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan in April,” maintaining there was no need to reconsider his planned departure deadline.

Interestingly, this stance on the left is remarkably similar to former President Donald Trump’s position. “It’s not that we left Afghanistan. It’s the grossly incompetent way we left!” **Trump declared** last week. But the truth is that the decision by Biden to pursue a calendar-based withdrawal motivated by the “ending endless war” narrative and an ill-advised **promise Biden made in his campaign** is the primary explanation for the disastrous outcome.

made in his campaign is the primary explanation for the disaster we are seeing now in Afghanistan.

To be sure, Biden's botched withdrawal made things even worse. It was by no means inevitable that thousands of Americans and many more vulnerable Afghan partners would find themselves stuck on Aug. 15 in a country conquered by the Taliban, wondering if it's possible to sneak past **terrorist checkpoints** and make it safely to the solitary evacuation point at Kabul airport. They could have been evacuated from the country months ahead of time.

The administration should have had a contingency plan in place to at least slow the Taliban's advance to permit time for an expedited but orderly evacuation from multiple departure points around the country. It is reasonable to ask whether such a contingency plan existed and why it was not implemented.

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But even if the premature American military withdrawal had proceeded as smoothly as possible, we still would have ended up with a Taliban-Al Qaeda terror syndicate governing from Kabul enjoying a virtually uncontested safe haven in Afghanistan — as it did on Sept. 11, 2001. Millions of additional Afghans would still have wanted to flee, and nearly every Afghan woman and girl would have been left to fear that the freedoms they had increasingly come to enjoy were at risk.

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Trump and the many on the left like Dowd who pushed the “ending endless war” narrative are trying to cover their tracks. But Trump never left anyone with the impression that he prioritized allies or democracy abroad. Biden, in contrast, has given a lot of lip service to the importance of standing with allies, helping fellow democracies and leading with diplomacy (all priorities I emphatically support and was proud to help advance when I served as a Senate staffer).

Then, after talking the talk, our current commander in chief failed to walk the walk. The Biden administration abandoned a beleaguered democracy in its hour of need and lost one of America's most valuable counterterrorism allies in the process. Unsurprisingly, diplomacy not

backed by military power proved ineffective — even destructive.

Securing those gains — not to mention preventing another 9/11 attack from being launched from Afghanistan against our country — was evidently not a sufficient reason for some to justify retaining **a few thousand troops in Afghanistan** in ongoing support of Afghan forces **bearing the brunt of the burden**, and the sacrifice, to hold back a **murderous and misogynist terrorist adversary**.

Even if the premature American military withdrawal had proceeded as smoothly as possible, we still would have ended up with a Taliban-Al Qaeda terror syndicate governing from Kabul.

In the coming days, members of Congress will convene hearings to understand what went wrong in Afghanistan. The urgent focus should be pressing the administration to get Americans and vulnerable Afghans to safety regardless of how long it takes. Senators and representatives should also demand answers on why the withdrawal went so badly.

But if members of Congress stop there, they will miss the main reason for the disaster we are witnessing: the administration's decision to conduct a full military withdrawal by a specific date knowing that it would almost certainly result in a Taliban takeover and terrorist safe haven.

While working to minimize the damage from this mistake, we should accept the clear lessons that will help us avoid similar disasters in the future. That is a goal around which all Americans, regardless of political party, should be able to unite.

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